

VZCZCXYZ3971
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHYD #0211/01 0641518
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041518Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8650
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE 0102
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1709
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2010
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 0439
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L YAOUNDE 000211

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR AFRICA ACTION OFFICER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON: STRIKES AND DEMONSTRATIONS...WHAT NOW?

REF: YAOUNDE 193

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On February 25-27, Cameroon experienced its worst period of violence since the early 1990s. Violent protests and looting left major property damage and 16-17 dead (according to government estimates; nonofficial estimates are much higher). The causes were a mix of political and economic factors, including rising fuel and other commodity prices, the killing of two youths in a political demonstration, the government closure of a popular TV station, the President's plans to change the constitution, and internal power struggles. The GRC quelled the violence with a strong military presence and a crackdown on opposition voices and those the government considered to be potential troublemakers. A tense calm has been restored but unless the government (GRC) takes steps to address some of the people's grievances, demonstrations could reignite. The events of last week are a reminder of many of the underlying sources of potential instability in Cameroon. End Summary.

Three Days That Shook A Nation

¶2. (U) The situation in Cameroon began deteriorating on February 23 after Social Democratic Front (SDF, the main opposition party) parliamentarian Jean Michel Nintheu attempted to demonstrate in Douala against a proposed constitutional amendment to remove presidential term limits. According to witnesses, gendarmes were waiting for Nintheu at the site of the demonstration and he canceled the protest because he did not have enough demonstrators. In an effort to intimidate the population, police and gendarmes used water cannons and tear gas in the surrounding neighborhood. The population, already incensed by the GRC closure of a popular independent TV station, left their homes and surrounded the gendarmes. The security forces responded forcefully, in the process killing two youths.

¶3. (U) On February 3, the taxi and transport unions had announced that they would strike on February 25 to oppose a 20 FCFA (4 US cent) increase in gasoline prices. Fueled by the taxi strike and outrage over the deaths of the two youths at the protest in Douala, the port city erupted into violence on February 25. The same day all major cities in Cameroon, with the exception of those in the Grand North and East, observed the taxi strike. The capitals of the West, North

West, South West and Center Provinces (including Yaounde) subsequently experienced violence and looting. Late on February 26, the taxi and transport unions signed an agreement with the GRC to reduce gas by 6 FCFA (1 US Cent) and end the strike.

14. (SBU) Despite the union agreement, most taxi drivers and transporters continued their strike. On February 27 President Biya addressed the nation with an uncompromising speech (reftel). Many Cameroonians were incensed by the President's harsh tone and the lack of any concessions. However, the speech, backed up with a heavy security force presence on the streets, had the immediate effect of quelling the demonstrations and violence. The country has since returned to a tense calm. The local media puts the death toll from last week's violence at around 20; a senior government official told us it was 16 or 17, with some killed by security forces and some otherwise killed in the course of the riots. Radio France International reported over 100 deaths. We have not been able confirm any of these figures.

Why the Riots Happened Now

15. (C) The GRC was surprised by the violence that accompanied the taxi/transporter strike. Unlike previous strikes, there appeared to be no government infiltration in the ranks and the strike was effective. This type of violence had not been seen since the turbulent 1990's and had never before been seen in Yaounde. Some senior government contacts are convinced that at the heart of the unrest was an ongoing high-stakes power struggle, with elements of the government and some ousted senior officials (such as former Finance and Economy Minister Polycarpe Abah Abah) trying to sow instability and undermine the President. As evidence, they argue that rioters received pay-offs, that the riots were limited to certain regions of the country (five of ten provinces and only certain districts within each affected province), and that the violence of the past week appeared unusually well coordinated. There is certain paranoia at top levels of government and one senior presidential aide told Pol/Econ Chief he did not know who was behind the events but was sure the instigators did not come from within the government. There are definite signs of internal power jockeying and we do not discount this perspective, conveyed to us by a wide range of top GRC contacts over the past few days.

16. (C) The power struggle within the government took advantage of a mix of real grievances shared by many Cameroonians, including:

- Economic Problems: The fuel price rise, while small, came on the back of a series of price increases. Prices of basic foodstuffs and other items also increased, and there is widespread discontent about the high cost of living. Overall economic growth is tepid, with significant unemployment and the perception of growing poverty. We examine the economic underpinnings of the violence in more detail septel.

- Perceived Government Insensitivity: There is a great disconnect between the government and society in Cameroon and many average Cameroonians are tired of Biya's 25 year reign. Symptomatic was the fact that the GRC made no public attempt to explain fuel price increases. The Minister of Communication blamed the SDF for the violence. Rene Sadi, Secretary General of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic

SIPDIS

Movement (CPDM), blamed political and social actors for the violence. No politicians, with the exception of the Minister of Transport, reached out to the general public during this period. The February 27 speech by President Biya, in which he blamed opposition politicians for manipulating the country's youth, further fanned the flames of popular discontent. Many saw in Biya's address the echoes of former President Amadou Ahidjho's statement during the 1981 university riots, in which he addressed the nation with one

statement: "the forces of order will use all necessary means to restore order."

- Constitutional Change: Another, particularly important example of this disconnect was President Biya's New Year's announcement that he would "reconsider" provisions of the constitution, including eliminate term limits, thereby allowing the possibility he will stay in power beyond 2011. Despite civil society and opposition party calls for dialogue, the GRC has not been responsive. The SDF and some of the protesters were motivated by opposition to constitutional change. Some contacts also point to this as a significant source of anger for the youth, who reportedly had been resigned to weathering Biya's last years until his New Year's speech.

- Limits on Freedom of Expression: There is growing frustration with a climate of reduced freedom of expression. Examples include:

-- On January 10, the government interrogated human rights activist Hilaire Kanga for speaking out against constitutional change.

-- On January 17, the Governor of the Littoral Province (which includes Douala) banned public demonstrations.

-- On February 21 and 22 the GRC shut down Equinoxe TV and Radio Station for covering the rallies in Douala opposing the constitutional amendment on term limits. According to the GRC, Equinoxe TV/Radio had not paid their licensing fee. (Note: 95% of radio and television stations have not paid their license fees.) On February 27, Equinoxe Radio paid the licensing fee and placed a down payment for the TV licensing fee but was not allowed to reopen.

The Crack Down

¶7. (SBU) Biya's speech, backed by a very heavy military deployment, chilled the protesters and opposition, bringing an end to the violence, at least for the moment. There is a tense calm and great uncertainty in the air. The GRC has tightened its grip on opposition voices. On February 28, the GRC seized the radio equipment of privately owned Magic FM because it claimed their call-in program was "irresponsible in allowing the public to voice their reactions to President Biya's speech." The GRC also threatened the editor of the station, as well as other journalists.

¶8. (C) The GRC reportedly blocked the road of SDF leader John Fru Ndi and took the cell phone SIM cards of many in the Bamenda area. There are reports of roundups of opposition elements and arbitrary arrests. Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Amadou Ali told Pol/Econ Chief that in response to last week's violence there have been 250 arrests in Yaounde, 600 in Douala and 180 in the Northwest, for a total of 1,030, all of whom he claimed were accused of crimes or misdemeanors. On March 1, gendarmes beat and dragged away two peaceful protesters in front of our Embassy (which we are formally protesting).

Questions for the Future

¶9. (C) How long will the "enforced calm" last? Government sources believe there is a low risk of the situation flaring up again at the moment, given the strong security presence and the GRC's desire to address some of the commodity price issues. Some contacts, including in the military, believe there is a very real potential for another flare-up, especially when the security presence is lowered. All our European diplomatic colleagues, except the French, believe the potential for renewed unrest in the short term remains. None of the grievances of the public have been addressed, whether in the President's speech or the government's

actions. The power struggle at the top helping to drive the violence is not over. Douala remains a hotbed of political opposition and all eyes will be on that city for clues about what will occur in other parts of the country. Some sources believe the President will take advantage of the current military posture on the streets to submit the controversial constitutional amendment to parliament, perhaps as early as next week, posing new risks for unrest. Any spark -- including manipulative politicians, a catastrophic event, deeper economic problems, or a triggering event external to Cameroon -- could suffice to set off another spasm of violence.

¶10. (C) What will the military do? The army, Presidential Guard, and elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) are very heavily deployed on the streets, including about 500 regular military and 400 BIR forces in Yaounde and another 400 BIR in Douala. They are unlikely to be capable of maintaining this kind of posture indefinitely. However, they appear loyal to the President, who has carefully nurtured and maintained the ethnic balance of the armed forces. Elements of the military are unhappy about the lack of upward mobility (with so many elderly generals) and there is strong dislike for Minister of Defense Ze Meka, who some see as helping support the current unrest. However, while things may change, there is no sign of an imminent coup.

¶11. (C) What will the opposition do? The country's four main opposition parties are weak, lacking a strong leader. SDF President John Fru Ndi disclaimed any involvement in the riots and blamed elements within the CPDM, specifically "white collar thugs, manipulating the state apparatus and its information system, who helped Cameroon top the corruption league." Opposition parties are unlikely to take on the military but may support some future protest action.

¶12. (C) What are the Implications for the U.S.?

-- At the least, the image of Cameroon as a bastion of stability in Central Africa needs to be examined more carefully. Even if the current situation remains calm, last week was a reminder that there are many unresolved issues, both political and economic, that are likely to resurface at some point down the road, possibly soon. The 75-year-old Biya is increasingly isolated and unpopular and Cameroonians, while generally peaceful, have shown themselves capable of violently taking to the streets.

-- We should continue to work actively to encourage a democratic transition. Biya's determination to end term limits and stifle or intimidate opposition will make this work more difficult and may require us to speak out more forcefully, in private and in public. We issued a statement published on March 3 expressing regret for the violence and deaths and calling for greater political dialogue and a peaceful resolution of problems. Top French and the European Union (EU) officials have recently made similar statements.

-- Our economic engagement is all the more important to stability, and the unrest is likely to make the GRC even more eager for U.S. investment (in part to help legitimize the government). Our robust mil-mil engagement should continue. We have many shared interests in Cameroon's security and this part of our relationship gives us more leverage than any other, but we should be prepared to reassess it over time as the situation evolves.

Comment

¶13. (C) The worst violence here in over 15 years has left many Cameroonians feeling angry and more anxious about the future. Even if calm returns over the short term, Cameroon has the ingredients of serious instability: a long-serving president out of touch with his people and in the last period of his life/tenure; no viable constitutional succession mechanism; slow economic growth amid rising expectations; ethnic divisions below the surface (reflecting the country's

280 ethnic groups); increasing crime; and a troubled neighborhood. Average Cameroonians would say they were economically better off in the 1990s than today. To date the GRC has moved slowly on economic and political reform, often citing the need for stability as a justification. Ironically, the go-slow approach could very well undermine stability, if not soon then over the longer term.

GARVEY